

# Discourses of conflict and collaboration and institutional context in the implementation of forest conservation policies in Soria, Spain

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**Abstract** This article examines the emergence of conflict and collaboration in the implementation of forest conservation policies in Soria, Spain. We draw insights from discursive institutionalism and use a comparative case study approach to analyse and compare a situation of social conflict over the Natural Park declaration in the Sierra de Urbión, and a civil society led collaborative process to develop management plans for the “Sierra de Cabrejas” in Soria. The implementation of the EU Habitats Directive generated different outcomes in these two cases, which unfolded in the context of the same nature conservation legislation and national and provincial administrative structures but differed in terms of types of forests involved, property rights arrangements and forest use histories. We critically examine the influence of the institutional context and dominant discourses on the emergence of outcomes: conflict emerged where local institutions and discourses were threatened by the EU directive, while collaboration was possible where local institutions and counter-discourses were weak. We find that the institutional context plays an important part in determining local discourses in the implementation of forest conservation policies. Yet local counter-discourses have limited influence in the implementation and policy processes in the face of contestation by the discourses of regional civil servants conservation activists.

**Keywords** Discursive institutionalism · Forest conservation · Conflict · Collaboration · Natura 2000 · Policy outcomes · Path-dependency · Context

## Introduction

This article examines the implementation of the Habitats Directive (CD 92/43/EEC) and the Birds Directive (CD 79/409/EEC), which underlie the European network of protected

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areas called Natura 2000. Within the context of participatory processes linked to the implementation of Natura 2000, we investigate the role of the institutional context and discourses in explaining distinct outcomes of conflict and collaboration in two localities in Spain.

The first phase of implementation of Natura 2000 included the transposition of the Habitat Directive into national legislation and the designation of a network of protected areas by the member states. A second phase involved the development of management plans for the designed areas. Controversies emerged over site designation in many member states in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Bjorkell 2008; Hiedanpää 2002; Krott et al. 2000; Paavola 2003; Pinton 2001; Rojas-Briales 2000; Stoll-Kleemann 2001; Wurzel 2008). The controversies highlighted the importance of compensating land owners for adverse changes in their property rights, such as reduced access or management constraints (European Commission 2003). But as it would be difficult to compensate all landowners affected by Natura 2000 (Julien et al. 2000), the European Commission decided to promote participation as a tool for facilitating policy implementation (Europarc-España 2007; European Commission 2004).

Participation provides the physical and organisational spaces for dialogue, collaboration and policy change (Keough and Blahna 2006). Collaborative planning in environmental decision-making makes use of participatory approaches particularly in situations where there are multiple actors with conflicting interests (Saarikoski et al. 2013). Conflict and collaboration might impact on the policy process, driving change in the broader institutional context (Raitio 2012b).

Studies at the EU and national level have explained how new discourses are brought into policy processes and are eventually institutionalized in policy arrangements and social practices (den Besten et al. 2013; Pistorius et al. 2012; Somorin et al. 2011). However, these studies do not contextualise discourses within their local institutional setting, and do not look at the local discourses. Yet, local actors can exert influence in institutionalization processes initiated at national or international level through discursive contestation resulting in either conflict or collaboration. This article contributes to this literature by investigating broader and local discourses in the implementation of EU conservation policies in two institutional settings and by providing new empirical evidence on the implementation of conservation policies at the local level in Spain.

In the first case study in Sierra de Urbión, local inhabitants and the local administration contested the designation of a new Natural Park. In the second case, in Sierra de Cabrejas, a bottom-up participatory process emerged to support and facilitate the enlargement of a protected area. We use discourse analysis to investigate how institutional factors affected discourses of forest conservation and planning in the two cases studies and then compare the two cases to help shed light on their respective institutional conditions.

Our results highlight how it is easier for new discourses and ideas regarding forest conservation to emerge when forest-related institutions such as property rights arrangements, governance structures, and forest management plans are weaker or less traditional. In these circumstances, rural development policies and other non-forestry sources can inform actors' strategies and discourses. We find that where enduring forest-related institutions prevail and dominate, they are likely to inform discursive struggles over forest conservation. Such conditions leave little room for new discourses and ideas to emerge and for institutional change to take place.

In what follows, we will first outline the conceptual framework that informs our research and then introduce case studies and explain the methods we use to examine the emergence of conflict and collaboration. We then analyse the conflict in Sierra de Urbión,

highlighting how the historical institutional context informs local actors' discourses on forest conservation. Then we examine the emergence of collaboration in the form of participatory planning in Sierra de Cabrejas. In the discussion we summarise how the dominant discourses and the institutional context influence actors' discourses, and relate our findings to the existing literature. We conclude by reflecting on the implementation of conservation policies and future research needs.

### **Discursive institutionalism, conflict and collaboration**

Discursive institutionalism is increasingly used in the field of forestry and conservation policy analysis to understand how actors' ideas become institutionalized (Arts and Buizer 2009; Raitio 2012a; Rydin 2003; Sotirov et al. 2012; Saarikoski et al. 2013). We employ the insights of discursive institutionalism to explore the emergence of conflict and collaboration in the implementation of conservation policies in Soria, Spain.

Discursive institutionalism is a powerful approach for explaining policy outcomes because it combines the analysis of structural aspects determined by pre-existing institutions with the more process oriented ideas and discursive practices of actors that shape the meaning of forest conservation plans. This dualism is explained in the discursive institutionalism literature as “constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning, which are internal to agents whose background ideational abilities explain how they create and maintain institutions at the same time that their foreground discursive abilities enable them to communicate and change them” (Schmidt 2010). Discourses are translated into discursive practice through communicative processes within which actors form and exchange their ideas, often through contestation with others (den Besten et al. 2013; Schmidt 2010). Discourse analytical approaches are increasingly used to examine European forest and biodiversity policies (Leipold 2014).

Following the above line of thought, collaboration and conflict can be seen as resulting from processes of policy argumentation within a specific institutional context. Policy outcomes emerge from the interaction between the policy processes and their context (Cashore et al. 2001; Saarikoski et al. 2013). Few studies have examined the dynamics between local discourses and broader social structures in policy processes. Research often focuses on internal processes of conflict or collaboration instead of relating them to their wider institutional and cultural contexts (Hillier 2003; Soini and Aakkula 2007). For instance, Idrissou et al. (2011) acknowledge the role of institutions in participatory natural resources management. They conceptualize participation as interaction between frames, social cohesion and institutions, attributing successful natural resource management to social cohesion and effective informal institutions created in participatory processes. Yet, there is a need to understand how local institutions have informed the frames and discourses used in the collaborative process.

Leach (2008) argues that there is a need for new analytical approaches that take seriously the human-ecological dynamics, history, path dependency, and the ways in which different people frame or construct problems. The historical context is important for understanding how institutions resist change, and how new institutions are built on existing ones (Leach et al. 1999; North 1990). Historical institutionalism uses the concept of “path dependency” (Hall and Taylor 1996) to connect the past, present and future of institutional development. Its view of punctuated continuity of institutional development has been criticized for its emphasis on stability rather than change. Amalgamating key insights of

discursive institutionalism can help to explain how ideas and agency influence institutional change and policy outcomes (Peters et al. 2005).

Raitio (2012a, b) suggests that forest planning involves a set of informal rules (such as an obligation of the public forest agency to provide economic benefits to the State as land owner as well as to the local economy) that reinforce formal rules regarding e.g. timber production, at times at the expense of other social obligations. In her study, institutional context reinforces the role of the forest agency as a timber producer rather than as a facilitator or broker between different forest-related interests. Thus, despite talk about and investment in collaborative forest planning, prevailing practices reinforce existing institutional structures. In contrast, Hiedanpaa (2005) assesses the collaborative planning for the regional Finnish forestry plans as a success. According to his interpretation, the regional forest planning process could be collaborative because it did not disturb the prevailing communal and regional institutions and because at the same time was open to environmental agencies' and activists' discourses.

We apply the above described conceptual framework and insights to two case studies below by first identifying historical institutions which influence current local discourses on forest conservation. Then we contrast the local discourses with dominant discourses which might enable or constrain different policy outcomes, originating from for example regional public authorities and the Commission of the European Union.

### Case studies, materials and methods

We combine discursive and historical institutional approaches in two case studies on the implementation of conservation policies in Soria, Spain. In the first case, a conflict emerged over the designation of a Natural Park in the Sierra de Urbión. In the second case, a collaborative participatory process emerged in a bottom-up way for the development of management plans for the Sierra de Cabrejas. The two cases were selected because they manifested different policy outcomes despite sharing many other important aspects. We seek to explain different policy outcomes using the logic of case comparison.

The province of Soria lies in the North-East of the Castilla and Leon Autonomous Community. Forest covers about 58 % or 600,000 ha of the province (Lucas 2000). The north-western part is covered by conifer forests although there are also scattered stands of mixed and hardwood trees (Segur 2007). There is a long history of forest exploitation and conservation in the upper region of Soria—*la Sierra de Urbión*. Lagoon ecosystems and surrounding forests are protected under the Natura 2000, the Plan de Ordenación de Recursos Naturales (PORN) [Natural Resources Management Plan] and Natural Park designation. It was the designation of a Natural Park in 2010 that sparked the conflict in the Sierra de Urbión.

In the South of Soria, *la Sierra de Cabrejas* is covered by Spanish juniper forest, the largest of its kind in Europe. In 2006, 32,000 ha of *la Sierra de Cabrejas* were included into Natura 2000. Earlier only 263 ha of the juniper forest were protected. Local Action Groups (LAGs are associations of municipalities) and regional administration produced a management plan for the Natura 2000 site in a participatory process. The LAGs were originally formed for the implementation of the European rural development plans. What makes the case of *la Sierra de Cabrejas* unique is that the development of management plans was not lead by the regional administration but by LAGs. *Sierra de Cabrejas* differs from the *Sierra de Urbión* because of the former's lower population density and history of forest abandonment.

The two cases share some important institutional characteristics, including being governed by the same nature conservation legislation and the same national and provincial administrations. But there are also important differences related to types of prevailing forests, property rights and forest use histories. These diverse conditions enable us to examine differences in argumentative processes about conservation policies and their interaction with the institutional and discursive contexts. A comparison of the two cases helps to explain conflict and collaboration as policy outcomes.

Fieldwork in the case study communities was undertaken over a three-month period from May 2009 to September 2009. It included the collection documentary material, qualitative interviews and keeping a field diary. Documentary material such as media coverage and policy documents was analysed to discern socially embedded rules and formal bureaucratic institutions (Cleaver 2000). This distinction allowed us to consider cross-level regulatory arrangements from local ordinances to forest management plans and European directives, and to analyse how these institutions inform the frames and ideas that actors used as discursive devices. We interviewed 32 representatives of: (i) local administration and villagers affected by protected areas ( $n = 17$ ), (ii) regional civil servants responsible of the implementation of conservation policies ( $n = 7$ ), and (iii) conservation activists, academics and environmental consultants ( $n = 8$ ).

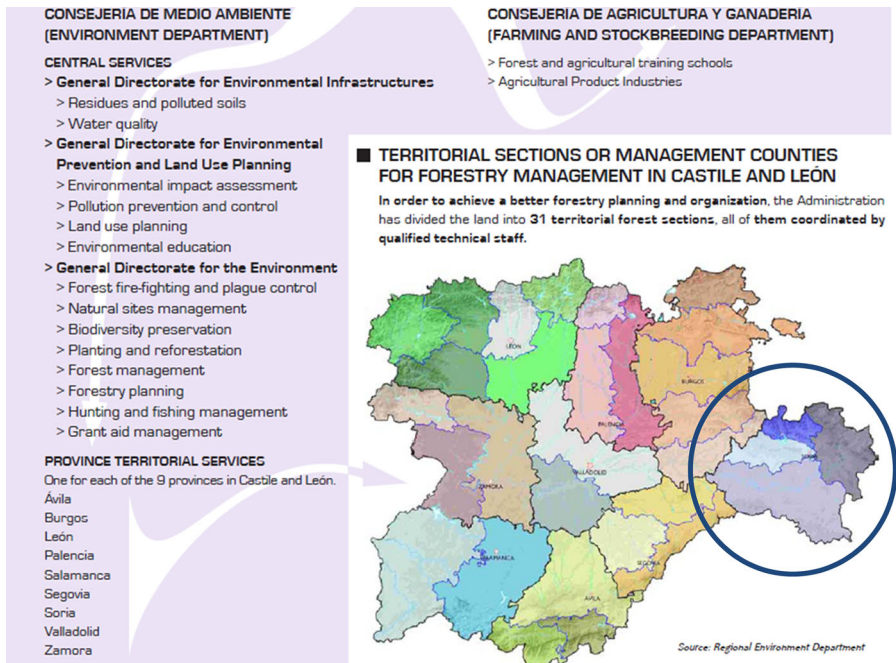
The first group of actors includes inhabitants that have been exposed to the present institutional context. In their discourses they often mentioned facts related to the history of the site. Our task has been to investigate the links between these facts and their discourses on conservation and forest management. The second group includes civil servants working at the Protected Areas Department. This service operates under the General Directorate of Natural Environment of Castilla and León. Technical assistance is, however, devolved to the Territorial Services. There is one Territorial Service for each of the nine provinces in Castilla and León. Soria is one of these provinces. In Soria's Territorial Service qualified technical staff coordinates forest conservation and management planning (Fig. 1).

Finally, the third group includes conservationist, academics and consultants. Their discourse is institutionalized in the Habitats Directive and EU conservation policy more widely. In order to analyse this discourse, we also examined EU conservation policy documents in addition to conducting interviews with actors belonging to the group.

Open-ended questions were used to enable the respondents to express how they understood the conservation of forests and how they construe their own identity with respect to the natural environment (Fischer and Marshall 2010; Buijs et al. 2011). Material collection was undertaken in several stages, starting with exploratory interviews and following with the collection and analysis of documentary material and the bulk of in-depth interviews. Initial interviewees were selected from the lists of participants of policy and other meetings to do with the implementation of conservation policies. Later interviewees were asked to name further potential participants (snowballing). All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Open coding on the transcripts provided the basis for the discourse analysis. Discourse analysis focused on four main themes: actors' interests and strategies; discourses on nature conservation; discourses on their environment; and, how actors understood governance of the above-mentioned environment, and their role in their general picture.

### **The conflict in the Natural Park of the Sierra de Urbión**

In Sierra de Urbión, forests have traditionally provided subsistence and income. In the last century, the role of forests underpinned complex relations between the local communities



**Fig. 1** Environment department structure in Castile and León. León (Junta de Castilla y León, Consejería de Medio Ambiente 2007)

and the state, which created tensions between levels of governance and can still spark conflicts. In what follows, we will first discuss how actors frame the conflict over the designation of the Natural Park, then describe the relevant past and current institutions and in the end explain how the institutions are related to actors' discourses in the conflict.

In June 2009, the inhabitants of the village of Covalada in Sierra de Urbión were polled over the potential designation of 2,200 ha of forest as a Natural Park. About half of the people, 848 out of 1,678 inhabitants participated in the poll (La Voz de Pinares [local newspaper], 31 July 2009). The villagers opposed the designation of the Natural Park by a small majority of only 25 votes. The forest was designated as a natural park in February 2010 despite public opposition.

In order to analyse how the conflict has been framed, we examined views expressed in a public hearing organized by the head of the Territorial Services in Soria to clarify the controversy over the Natural Park in February 2008 (e.g.: La Voz de Pinares, 11 February 2008) and in public debates to which town council representatives for the environment were summoned to explain the advantages and disadvantages of the Natural Park on the eve of the poll held on the 25th of July of 2009. Furthermore, other views regarding the designation of the Natural Park were collected from local press texts.

The conflict over the Natural Park declaration has been framed in economic and property rights terms. Discourses in favour of the declaration emphasised economic opportunities associated with the park, whereas discourses against it were at odds with the constraints to forest access and decision-making rights. In contrast, Natural Park supporters made an effort to separate the discussion on decision-making rights and forest ownership from the debate on forest conservation. For example, some local and regional public

authorities highlighted that “regardless of the result of the consultation, property rights will not change”.

The village of Covalada made a formal complaint about the conflict between local and regional competences regarding the Natural Park to the Spanish Constitutional Tribunal (La Voz de Pinares, 8 October 2010). Through this complaint, the village of Covalada sought recognition of its legal right to manage land within the boundaries of the Natural Park in its jurisdiction. The then Mayor of Covalada assessed the situation as follows:

They want to make a natural park by law... and that's what is good... we've had consultations, I don't know if you were aware, but I made the villager decide, because it's clear that the mayor can often be wrong when making a decision, so I left the responsibility ... about whether to ... be part of the park or not to the villagers... the concept that they have of their forest is as their property... and in the end it turned out that local villagers did not want to belong to this park...

Is the current conflict over the Natural Park just a reincarnation of older struggles around local control over the environment? What can history tell us about the role of institutions, such a forest ownership and the authority to make decisions on forest management in this conflict? In what follows, we will explore in more detail forest ownership and management and how these institutions are embedded in discursive practices on the conflict over the Natural Park designation in the Sierra de Urbión.

The historical relationship of Covalada villagers with forests is important for understanding the conflict over the Natural Park declaration. The designation mostly affects public utility forests in the area. Public utility forests originate to the establishment of the public forest service (PFS) and the expropriation [Desamortización] of Royal, clerical and municipal land by the State and its subsequent privatisation. PFS, a technocratic unit of professional forest engineers, succeeded in excluding public utility forests from privatisation in 1855 because of the importance of timber and fuel wood as strategic resources (Marraco-Solana 1991). PFS was given a formal role in the development of forest management plans for public utility forests.

A century later, the regional level of public forestry administration (PFA) is still responsible for the management of public utility forests. Yet, most public utility forests are still owned by local communities and managed under long-established local ordinances. The new layer of forest management involving PFS and later PFA was simply added on top of the older communal regime of forest management. Over time many villagers have adopted the technical jargon of those forest management plans. Furthermore, they associate forest conservation to forest management, which aims at maintaining the continued existence of forests by using the maximum sustainable yield criterion for harvesting decisions and by ensuring that forests are regenerated after harvesting. These similarities between discourses on forest conservation between civil servants and villagers in Sierra de Urbión reflect local attempts at gaining legitimacy in front of the public authorities regarding their competence to manage and protect the forests. As a result, the conflict is more about *who* has the right to manage the forest rather than *how* the forest should be managed. Villagers' discourses on their “right to decide” refer to the past as evidence that “they know how to manage their forest”:

We do not want to give away the decision making power over the forest... that we consider as ours... [...] they should transfer more... to the local city councils, because... they have demonstrated that they manage their forests well (Villager).

In the study area, a Royal Decree of 1901 entitled villagers to harvest 1500–3500 U of timber depending on the size of their villages (Domínguez Lerena 2007; Kleinpenning



1962). Income from forestry was particularly important after 1950, because poor soil fertility and frequent frosts meant agriculture was not a viable source of income. In the village of Covalada, the value of each set of pines assigned to a family (approx. 30 m<sup>3</sup>) could reach the equivalent of 240 euros per annum in 1955–1959, when the average annual salary was equivalent to 140–180 Euros (Kleinpenning, 1962; p. 146). The local administration was responsible for apportioning timber among entitled inhabitants. However, a civil society organization, the local wood board, [junta de maderas], selected the trees to be harvested and sold them (Lucas 2000). Junta de maderas usually selected the best pine trees from the forest. Its practices were not always in line with the silvicultural practices approved by forest officers, which was a source of conflict between the villagers and forest authorities (Kleinpenning 1962). To sum up, local informal rules and formal rules for over a century have generated a current complex system of forest management and property rights (Table 1):

Although public administration has taken over forest management, local communities remain the legal owners of public utility forests. The villagers as individuals are not legal owners of the forests, but they are entitled to a share of forest income through each set of pines assigned to a family. The local ordinances defined who is a local and who is not, and who is entitled to benefit from the forest and who is not, in an effort to exclude outsiders from the common forest and the social and political dynamics of the villages. The same logic underlies villagers' discourses on their right to manage the forest by drawing a boundary between the people who belong to the community and outsiders such as environmental activists, and therefore between those who can legitimately make decisions regarding the forest and those who cannot.

If the environmentalists came here to impose their views... the same thing would happen as with the government: people would not ... be so easily convinced. They can come and see, and give their opinion... [but] we still think that we are the ones that should manage these forests... Not the environmentalists, or the government (Villager)

In addition to being entitled to a share of forest income, the villagers had obligations and responsibilities to participate in communal work in the forests. Local communities also benefited indirectly from publicly funded forest operations and regeneration after logging because villagers were employed in these activities. Property rights are associated with forest income and have substantial economic implications. However, property rights have also other socio-political dimensions which informed i) discourses on the above described past institutional struggles; and ii) villagers' discourses on their relation with forests due to social and work obligations tied to the entitlement to forest income.

Past and present institutions are thus intimately related to the dependency of villagers on natural resources *and* to the State's desire to maintain control over them. One local interviewee noted that "*the State has always tried to get things from the public... and with forests it was very easy*" (Villager). Villagers had already earlier framed the Law 08/1991 on the Protected Natural Areas of Castile and León as "usurpation of their forests" (Villager). Local discourses suggest that forest conservation policies were a threat to their right to decide on Sierra de Urbión:

These new Natural Parks have a problem: they are managed by the regional government, and so, the link is lost with the people who live in these areas... Because they are not managing them... it should be made clear in the statutes of these national areas and parks, that the management responsibilities should be shared...



**Table 1** Complexity of governance of the public utility forest in the site

Legal rights in public utility forests	Regional administration	Local administration	Local people or neighbours
Ownership of the forests		×	
Forest management planning	×		
Forest operations	×	×	(×)
Right to have an income from the forest harvesting	×	×	×
Right to organize the selling of the wood	(×)		×

and that the rights of the villagers should be maintained... because if this area is to maintain its population it will be because of this. (Villager).

The local discourses confront discourses of the civil servants in the Protected Areas Department and the General Directorate of Natural Environment of Castilla and León. The regional administration uses technical and legalistic discourse to maintain control over decisions on forests and right to intervene despite local opposition. On the other hand, public resources invested in forests are seen by the regional administration and local villagers to guarantee the continued existence of the forest as well as to support local jobs. A public servant responsible for protected areas highlighted that the legal framework determines what is feasible and what is not, and the risk that participatory processes could raise false expectations.

I think we should consider to what extent the requirements fit with the existing structures, or if these could be changed... However, regarding competences or administrative structures... this is a huge qualitative leap... there may be things that are totally impossible... and it's very important to have this framework clear from the beginning of the process to avoid false expectations or unfeasible things ... (Civil servant).

Local discourses also contest Natura 2000 discourses on nature conservation which it define in terms of species and habitats. For instance, a report on the implementation of the Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora defines the aim of the Natura 2000 as “ensuring biodiversity in the European territory through the adoption of measures for the conservation of natural habitats and wild animals” (Commission of the European Communities 2004). Before 2001, environmental NGOs developed shadow lists which were used as an input for finalising the lists of designated areas to be protected under the Natura 2000 (Weber and Christophersen 2002). After 2001, environmental NGOs have shifted emphasis to the drafting of guidelines for the preparation of management plans. However, these guidelines do not necessarily integrate forest management plans for habitat conservation.

To sum up, our analysis of the conflict in Sierra de Urbión uncovered a long struggle over who should be entitled to make decisions over forests between the regional administration on the one hand, and the local administrations and the villagers on this other. The struggle is rooted in the imposition of forest management plans on communally owned forests, which has weakened the role of local ordinances in forest management. Both institutions inform discursive practices that are used to gain control over forests. Over more than a century, the discourses of civil servants and villagers on forest conservation and management have become intertwined. However, a conflict persists over who has the right to make decisions. Path-dependency and institutional stickiness have reinforced the

conflict and other local discourses on forest conservation have not emerged. However, discourses on forest conservation policies emphasising species, habitats and ecosystems are implemented and hegemonic discourses by their protagonists (conservationists and the regional administration) act as barriers to institutional change which would enhance local control over the forests.

### The collaborative planning process in the Sierra de Cabrejas

In Sierra de Cabrejas, two local action groups (LAGs, associations of municipalities) promoted the development of the first management plan for a Natura 2000 site in Castile and León. The LAGs were created as mandatory local governance structures required to access EU rural development funds. They involve public and private parties working together on local development strategies and activity portfolios (Fischler 2000). LAGs have expertise and experience to tap into resources other than the Leader (Tvrdonova 2008) from sectors such as tourism, cultural legacy, and nature conservation.

When the rumours about possible Natura 2000 designation of Sierra de Cabrejas started circulating, a LAG raised awareness by publishing a book on the Natura 2000 sites of importance in the Soria Province and by distributing it to local administration and villagers potentially affected by the protected area. The LAGs also promoted local debates on Natura 2000 through meetings, guided tours to juniper forests, public information material, an information bulletin broadcast in local radio and public discussions. The debates focused on uncertainties such as whether funds will be available; who should be responsible for forest planning and management; and what mechanisms should be used for participation, education and information exchange.

In 2003, a synthesis of these debates was presented to the representatives of the State and the EU. The executive manager of the Cid's Sorian Land Association asked whether a management plan based on civil society involvement would be accepted for the prospective Natura 2000 site. This was the starting point of collaboration for the development of the management plan in Sierra de Cabrejas (Campos-Fernandez and Martín-Olmos 2006).

LAGs' discourse on Natura 2000 as an opportunity for a participatory process emerged in the socio-economic context of forest abandonment (for more detailed description see below). The absence of economic activity in forests meant the absence of conflict in Sierra de Cabrejas. One LAG representative explained that:

Natura 2000 was something that failed here, we didn't know what it was and what it was for... how it would affect us... but the very structure of Natura 2000 talked about participation, although the lines were drawn in the land without mentioning it to anyone [...] Then we started to talk to people about how they perceived the conservation of natural spaces, and we decided to move from a general perspective of Natura 2000 to a more specific space... we tried to take advantage of what Natura 2000 can offer... we chose a space that was not very conflictive... because the land use there is minimal and then we decided to act upon a space that practically nobody lives in

Sierra de Cabrejas had been suffering from rural exodus for the past several decades. For instance, in Calatañazor, one of the biggest villages in the Sierra de Cabrejas, there are only 70 inhabitants left and most of them are retired (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2010). Avioncillo, a village located in the protected area, had only 10 inhabitants in 2010 (*ibid.*).

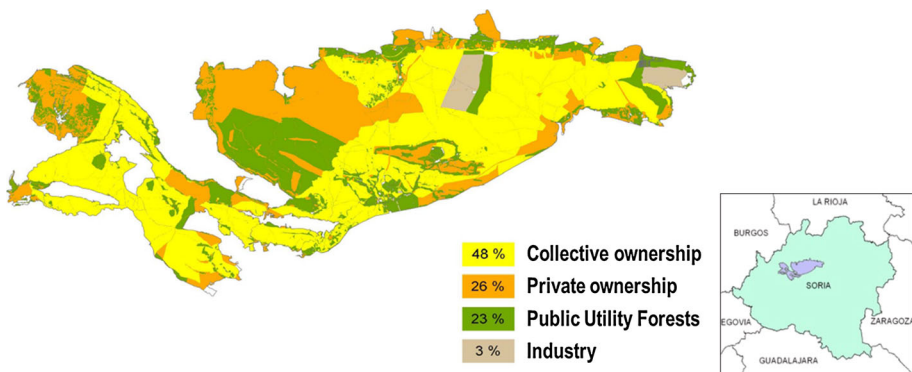
However, collaborative planning did not mean that there was no conflict in Sierra de Cabrejas. The forest owners' association (FOA) opposed the Natura 2000 designation in Sierra de Cabrejas at first with discourses about the burdens to private ownership. FOA and LAG shared the same framing of the problem but had different views on the solutions. While LAG advocated a collaborative process to develop management plans for the Natura 2000 site, FOA promoted enhanced forest management. Interviewed forest owners used economic discourses to call for improved forest management in the area:

It is necessary to take advantage of our assets and to get some money, whatever this money is, to take advantage of the land

In 2010, the FOA initiated a project called “Montes de Socios” to find the successors of the original owners of the forest because under prevailing rules it was becoming impossible to manage the forest when only a minority of owners were known. The idea was to create a management board based on a legal agreement among all co-owners to facilitate decision-making and management of the forest. A national newspaper (El Pais, 28 November 2011) commented on this project as follows:

Natural forests are a very emotive issue; everything that our ancestors did with so much love should be maintained to ensure their survival. And it should be very clear that there is no economic interest, this is more to preserve what our ancestors did

Next, we analyse how the institutional context inherited from the past relates to contemporary discourses. Sierra de Cabrejas was also affected by the State appropriation of Royal, clerical and municipal land. However, in Sierra de Cabrejas only a very limited proportion of forest was declared public utility forest. The appropriated land was auctioned off but municipalities were excluded from buying their own land back. The only way for villagers to maintain access to forests was to buy it back collectively. Collective ownership prevails on 48 % of the land and private ownership accounts for another 23 % (see Fig. 2). Today there are 11,250 co-owners of the forest, while the villages only have 2,822 inhabitants. Many original owners and their descendants have migrated elsewhere without necessarily knowing that they are legal owners of the forest. Many local inhabitants have in turn lost their ownership rights. As all co-owners need to agree on the management of the forest, forest management has become nearly impossible.



**Fig. 2** Structure of ownership in the Sierra de Cabrejas. *Source* (CESEFOR 2008)

**Table 2** Governance and rights in private and collective owned forests (Montes de Socios)

Legal rights in private and collective owned forests	Forest administration	Local municipalities	Local people or neighbours
Ownership of the forests			×
Forest management planning			×
Forest operations			(×)
Right to have an income from the forest harvesting	×	×	×
Right to organize the selling of the wood			×

The average size of a parcel of forest is 3.6 ha. Forest income is estimated to be less than 12 Euros per hectare per year. The FOA considered that low productivity and the small proportion of landowners resident in the area explain the abandonment of forest (ibid). About 3 % of the protected area (in grey) belongs to truffle industry. The remaining 26 % of the land consists of public utility forests which have a mean plot size of 239 ha. The public utility forests are located between Sierra de Urbión and Sierra de Cabrejas, and their tree species composition is mainly pine with some oak. The only public utility forest where Spanish juniper is the main tree species is in the village of Cabrejas.

Juniper forests have not been traditionally object of forest management planning in the province (Lucas 1998), because of their slow growth of only about 0.5 m<sup>3</sup>/ha per annum. More recently, a public utility forest with Spanish juniper as the main specie has adopted innovative forest management planning to reconcile habitat conservation, provisioning of wood, grazing and game, and recreational use (Sabin and Fernández 2006). In privately owned land, Spanish juniper is harvested without management plans or guidelines although harvesting needs a permit and in most cases a forester would choose the trees to be harvested.

Here, governance system on the forests is simpler than in public utility forests, since most of the legal rights are devolved in private and collective owned forests (Table 2).

The lack of strong forest institutions and institutional struggles for the right to decide translates to the dominance of economic discourses in the case study. Despite the low economic productivity of the forest, local counter-discourses call for compensation for limited access to forest resources. This claim is in line with international discourses on payments for carbon sequestration. Many owners argue that if their forests are carbon sinks, they must receive a payment for this service.

The forests are giving enough to the society, enough to take us into account, aren't they? We are not asking for subsidies, we only want them to pay for our contribution... this would be the logical thing... (Forest owner)

This discourse on payments for carbon sequestration is present in both cases. But in Sierra de Cabrejas, the forest is conserved because of its abandonment rather than management, weakening the argument about environmental services provided:

If this area has been protected it is for a reason... it's because it's very well preserved... it is precisely an area where there is no activity... there are no people, there is nothing

Despite its initial opposition to Natura 2000, FOA participated actively in the collaborative planning process initiated by the LAGs. Private forest owners' discourses on

private property were absorbed into participatory process through the creation of a thematic area on property.

In the case the alignment of LAGs' discourse on conservation with participation became institutionalized as a practice because it was in line with emerging official EU discourses on public participation. Furthermore, small population living in the area weakened the chances of counter-discourses. But although the developed Natura 2000 management plans enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of all involved actors, LAGs remain in a weak position since they are dependent on regional administration's acceptance and support. In 2012, the LAGs considered that it would be difficult to obtain any national or regional funds for further activities in the protected area due to the economic crisis in the country. One LAG member assessed the situation as follows: (i) finance is coming to an end and therefore they cannot afford the staff or consultancy payments; (ii) there is no clear signal from the regional administration about the next step after the approval of the plan; and (iii) there is no strong interest in the local administration to follow up the process.

To conclude, abandonment of land and low forest income favoured the framing of Natura 2000 as an opportunity for involving villagers in the development of management plans for the protected area and or increasing their voice over the implementation of forest conservation policies. The new management plan would have had a chance to set a new agenda for forest conservation in the Sierra de Cabrejas. However, legal and economic contexts undermined it in the end.

## Discussion

In Sierra de Urbión, discourses highlighting economic concerns and the right to make decisions about forests were in conflict with forest conservation. Other studies on Soria have demonstrated that forest heritage influences land tenure, land ownership and land use rights, as well as social conflicts over them (Montiel Molina 2007). In Sierra de Urbión, historical property rights largely explain the conflict over the designation of the Natural Park. Although the forest management discourse is shared by the villagers and the regional administration, the struggle over who is entitled to make decisions on forest remains unsettled and is at the root of the conflict.

New institutional scholars have shown how common property is structured by formal and informal institutions, and how these institutions can play a role in preventing environmental degradation by sanctioning mechanisms and by enhancing communication and cooperation (Berkes 2004; Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007; Ostrom et al. 1994; Ostrom 1990). Self-organized rule making partly explains why some groups govern their forests successfully (Andersson et al. 2014).

In Sierra de Urbión, such institutions are embedded in local discourses that have shaped: (i) the shared understanding of forest management among regional administration and villagers; and (ii) the struggle over who should have decision-making authority on forests. Here, the historical institutional context has impacted on the implementation of forest conservation policies leading to discourses on ownership and local control. In Sierra de Urbión, path-dependency has reinforced the frame on who has the right to make decisions over forests. Raitio (2012a, b) has similarly found that traditional forest planning involves a set of informal rules reinforcing formal rules for timber production even at the expense of other rules regarding participation.

In contrast, forest conservation was framed as an opportunity in Sierra de Cabrejas and as a result a collaborative process emerged. Sierra de Cabrejas differs from Sierra de

Urbión in three key respects: In the former there is (i) limited dependency on forests as most income is obtained from agriculture and rural development funds; (ii) limited role of public utility forests and forest management plans; and, (iii) substantial abandonment of forested land.

Limited dependency on forests explains why EU rural development and nature conservation policies had a bigger influence in Sierra de Cabrejas than forest policies. Limited dependency on forests and limited role of public utility forests and forest management plans translate to fewer formal and informal forest-related rules operating at local level, and therefore to bigger permeability to rules originating from other policy areas. Collaboration in Sierra de Cabrejas was influenced by experiences gained from the implementation of European rural development programmes. The formal and informal rules adopted by the LAGs and leadership were crucial for the emergence of collaborative planning.

Second, the weakening of historical forest management institutions led to openness to new discourses on forest conservation and rural development. New actors involved in forest conservation introduced new frames on species and habitats, disassociated from rules that have been part of forest policies in the past. This institutional vacuum created space for new ideas that have been institutionalized in policy arrangements and practices (den Besten et al. 2013).

Third, the abandonment of forest and the lack of dissenting views on forest use planning in Sierra de Cabrejas facilitated the adoption of other frames and the emergence of collaboration.

In both cases economic discourses are accepted and shared among most actors. However, they are decoupled from conventional forest production in the Cabrejas mountains. Instead, LAG seeks European union funding and conservation discourses are integrated into broader discourses of rural development policy. LAGs' discourse is coherent with the on-going discourses and practices on rural development. LAG became an agent of rural change, with knowledge of EU procedures and pro-active attitude for fundraising and rural development.

Finally, legalistic discourse on forest conservation prevented local discourses from achieving institutionalisation in the sense of institutional change in both cases. Regional civil servants and environmentalists have aligned positions and discourses. The State and its bureaucracy are considered responsible for the implementation of forest conservation policies. The implementation of nature conservation policy in Europe has been criticized for giving little attention to local stakeholders since implementation of conservation has been based on ecological criteria rather than on local knowledge (Beunen and De Vries 2011; Buijs et al. 2011; Ferranti et al. 2013). The legalistic interpretation of Natura 2000 has resulted in overly formal and bureaucratic translation of its directives into local management plans (Beunen and De Vries 2011) which leaves limited space for stakeholder participation (Ferranti et al. 2010; Stoll-Kleemann 2001). So despite the adoption of participatory policy planning in Sierra de Cabrejas, what should be protected and how is prioritised by scientific discourses over who has the right to decide on forests.

## Conclusions

This article shows that differences in the local institutional contexts influence discursive practices and dominant discourses in the two examined cases. In Sierra de Urbión, path dependencies related to property rights and governance arrangements act as a double-edged sword: actors resisting the National Park claimed rights to manage their forest, while

actors in favour of the Park confined the public debate to economic benefits and compensation. Resurgence of past institutional struggles over the forests directly challenged who has the right to decide on forests and as a result the conflict persisted. In Sierra de Cabrejas, discourse on participation enabled the framing of forest conservation policy as an opportunity. This, together with limited dependency on forests, limited role of forest institutions and depopulation, enabled the emergence of a collaborative planning process.

We demonstrated how the local institutional context explains the emergence of conflict or collaborative planning. However, we also demonstrate that local counter-discourses are prevented from achieving institutional change by the legalistic and scientific discourses of regional authorities and environmental organisations.

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